Why Do Not Catholics Appreciate Their Schools, Colleges and Universities?

Throughout the Country One-half of Catholic Students at College Attend Non-Catholic Colleges—Only the Parochial Primary School Is Thoroughly Appreciated by Catholics.

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THE Catholic school system, beginning with the kindergarten and running through the primary grades, the high school, the colleges and the universities, may fairly be described as the most remarkable phenomenon in the United States. The latest statistics published in the "Official Catholic Directory" return a population of sixteen and a half millions of Catholics in this country. There are one and a half millions of Catholic children in the parish schools. There are nearly 700 academies for girls, most of which carry on the education of children in the grades and girls in high school work. There are 210 colleges for boys, but of this number only eighty-four do work more advanced than the high school curriculum. And the number of young men doing either collegiate or graduate work in these eighty-four institutions is shown by the most recent returns to be 14,846. There are eighty-five institutions listed under the head of "Seminaries," and these include not only the large, well established, well reputed schools of theological learning, but also newer and smaller institutions, and the preparatory training schools established in certain dioceses and religious communities. Considered merely as to its extent, therefore, the Catholic school system in the United States is a mammoth fact which neither the statesman nor the schoolman can afford to ignore or contemn.

Considered in its meaning it is not less impressive. If we omit the seminaries, all of these other Catholic schools exist in obedience to a conscientious conviction in the Catholic mind that an education which is not saturated and interpenetrated by religion is essentially vitiated. It will not do to say that such training does not deserve to be called an education because that old habit of speech so popular with us for a long time is entirely misleading, and besides it looks very much like calling names. It is an education, but it is only partial in character. I attended a historical pageant at one of the State universities a short time ago and one of the figures burlesqued in that pageant was the theologian-politician, who made a speech in which it was constantly reiterated that mere book learning does not constitute an education, and that the important thing is conscience. It was in bad taste, I thought, for a State university, supported in considerable part by taxes of earnest religious men, to fling this sorry jibe into their faces.

The only decent and logical attitude for defenders of the public school to assume is that in the nature of the case religious instruction must be excluded from the curriculum of schools which assemble under one roof the children of believers, unbelievers and misbelievers. It is bad manners as well as bad logic merely to ridicule the perfectly truthful and most solemn statement that conscience really is the big thing in education and its development the finest fruit of the school. On the other hand, we are ourselves to blame perhaps for want of felicity in stating our own position. We have been guilty of making too little of that training which is effective as a preparation for the work of the world because it happens to be defective as a preparation for life in the other world. But passing all this it is a stupendous moral fact that the Catholic schools exist in obedience to the profound conviction that all human studies ought to be colored and interpenetrated by religious energy and warmed by religious feeling, and above all that the actual practice of religious devotion ought to be made a part of the school day. When we add that the tremendous expense, running up into millions of dollars annually, necessary to carry on these schools is borne by people the great majority of whom are engaged in hard manual labor, people who have indeed the necessaries of life, but few of its comforts and physical refinements, the splendor of this moral phenomenon is dazzling. The patriotism that exalts itself into heroism in time of war seems almost a commonplace passion when compared with the conscientious conviction that resists the wear of time, the temptation of money, the alluring promise of better financial opportunity and the other solicitations offered by the official school system.

And particularly does the Catholic school system become morally sublime when we realize that in spite of the fidelity and generosity of the Catholic laity and the zeal of the Catholic clergy, this great network of colleges and schools is made possible only through the work and self-sacrifice of members of the religious orders of men and women to whom is practically entrusted the whole work of Catholic education in our country. When it is remembered, for example, that of the great army of sisters engaged in the schools the majority receive less than $300 a year in the way of salary and that they do not spend anything like this amount on living expenses but on the contrary lay by a considerable part of it each year to build new schools or better or larger ones to make their work more effective, one is constrained to stand in admiration of a faith which works out into such superb heroism.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that a school which begins to be unpopular by the very fact that it dissociates itself from other schools in spirit, aspiration, method and end should be little understood and less appreciated by those other schools. The State system of education, so far as resources and emoluments are concerned, is in possession of the field. Daily the number of fine modern, hygienic and handsome school buildings is multiplied. Larger and larger each year grow the appropriations for supplying teachers, equipping laboratories, or libraries, and the other apparatus of education. Constantly more and more attractive grow the infinite variety of classes and more practical their application to the ordinary work of life. The Catholic school, built up in the heart of a devoted little parish, supported by the people out of their poverty and their faith, doing the essential work for which it was created with remarkable efficiency, but having neither the extraordinary impressiveness of the public school nor the large attendance nor the numerous faculty nor the many other adventitious aids that money may supply, very often looks low and cramped and dingy and unattractive in comparison with its official sister. Moreover, the methods and processes used in our schools are a matter of mystery to most non-Catholics. It is natural, therefore, for teachers in the public schools, and more particularly parents who patronize public schools to have fabulous notions of the inefficiency of Catholic primary education and Catholic high school work. Nor is the case better when one considers the Catholic colleges. The large appropriations enjoyed by State universities annually and the magnificent endowments bestowed by alumni or admirers upon a large number of private non-Catholic colleges and universities naturally impress the beholder with awe as compared with the Catholic college which enjoys, it is true, an endowment of flesh and blood in the shape of cultured and heroic men and women who give their services for the love of God, but who cannot expend money on whims or extravagances, nor put annual reports with magnificent figures. Besides, in the case of the colleges there is a curious and amusing suspicion that because scholarship there is religious and believing it must necessarily be unscientific.

I heard of a curious instance of this kind lately. One of the professors at Notre Dame was going over the university equipment with the president of a large State university. While examining the science departments the president asked what our attitude was to science, whereupon the professor answered that it was pretty largely the same as our attitude toward beefsteak or lobster. That eminent educator really believed that it was impossible for a man to have a fair knowledge of modern science without ceasing to believe in the Christian religion. Strange as it may seem to the uninitiated, this condition of mind is almost general among non-Catholic educators, and therefore they are thrown back into the unpleasant dilemma of believing either that we are not sincere as regards our religion or not profound as regards our science. In the same way Dr. Elliot, aforetime of Harvard, rendered Catholic education the only service of his life by declaring that the religion of the future would be a religion of science and that it would therefore be without priest or altar, without mystery or sacrifice. It is not surprising, therefore, that non-Catholic educators, and in less measure (when one speaks of the colleges) the non-Catholic public generally, are prone to undervalue the educational work of Catholic colleges and universities.

But does even the Catholic appreciate his schools? Unquestionably yes as regards the primary work of the parochial school. The bishops and priests of the country take a firm stand as regards the attendance of Catholic children at the parochial schools, but our non-Catholic friends ought not to fancy that this is the whole story. They can hardly be got to believe that all the fulminations of the bishops and all the persuasion of the priests would be utterly powerless to build up the great parish school system unless the Catholic laity themselves realized vividly the absolute need and desirability of the parish schools. In the spiritual world, as in the natural world, anything that is forced or artificial or contrary to the common sense of mankind is doomed to extinction. It is because fathers and mothers of Catholic children believe firmly in the need of Catholic schools for the little ones that these schools exist, and the demand of the laity for them would be hardly less insistent if the bishops and the priests left the whole matter to the decision of the laity. There is no doubt, therefore, but that the parochial primary school is thoroughly appreciated by Catholics.

In lesser measure the Catholic high school or preparatory college is also appreciated. This is shown by the fact that nearly 200 preparatory colleges exist for Catholic boys, or an average of four for each State of the Union, not to speak of the large and ever increasing number of high schools which cover the same field. Similarly, there are nearly fifteen academies for girls for each State of the Union, without taking account of a large number of high schools not listed as academies. And, finally, it seems clear that Catholic preparatory colleges and high schools are fully appreciated from the fact that a considerable number of careful parents among our non-Catholic neighbors prefer to send their sons, and especially their daughters, to Catholic secondary schools.

But what do we find when we come to consider the colleges and universities of the country? That there is some appreciation of the work they are doing is clear from the fact that they exist in such large number and that practically none of them is either failing or stationary. The fact that such appreciation is growing somewhat is shown conclusively from the increase in attendance at such schools decade after decade. Twenty-five years ago nearly three-fourths of the Catholic young men attending college were enrolled in non-Catholic colleges. Now the percentage is reduced to one-half. The statistics are not yet anything like what they ought to be, but at least the movement is in the right direction and it is not hopelessly slow. And yet it is simply a want of candor to say that Catholics manifest in practice any enthusiasm over their great colleges and universities. If it were so why should one-half of the Catholic college students of the country be training in non-Catholic colleges? Why should it have been possible for Dr. Eliot to say a few years ago the statement would not be true now—that Harvard is the largest Catholic college in the United States, meaning that there were more Catholic young men doing college work at Harvard than in any single Catholic school.

And yet one is at a loss to discern any good reason for the failure of our people to appreciate and support their own institutions. Let us consider, for example, the typical non-Catholic institution. A young man leaves his home and matriculates there. He is made acquainted with the charges for tuition and other necessary items of expense. There are agencies to help him to locate a satisfactory boarding house. He may consult with his dean about his classes. He must avoid anything like public disgrace, and if he is known to be habitually lazy or disputed he will be dropped from the school. So far as personal touch or influence is concerned, there is practically none of it exercised by such a school as we have described. It will not do for the student body to get a reputation for vice or indolence, because that would lessen the attendance and bring down public criticism and abuse. But within these large limits the student is left to his own expedients.

Now consider on the other hand what the typical Catholic college or university does for its students. It has all the good points of the non-Catholic school and in addition it conscientiously undertakes to exercise paternal care over every young man who matriculates in it. When it has provided lectures and laboratories and libraries it feels it has only begun its work. The social side of a boy's life is to be cared for just as satisfactorily as the intellectual side. In most cases, too, there are the physical details of food, lodging, amusement and the wonderfully complex and difficult thing known as discipline. Disciplinarians, without the natural advantage of family affection in the case, are expected to check, restrain, correct, deny, admonish a large number of young men during their most capricious years. A prefect, for example, may have responsibility for fifty young men or more, and he is expected, while avoiding so far as possible anything like offensive espionage, to keep in close touch with the work, recreations, difficulties and discouragements of a boy; to keep him pleased and comfortable and happy, while at the same time he puts limits to his freedom in the interest of study or character building or protection against the boy's folly. To do this in the case of a single young man is commonly found to be a reasonably good day's work for the average intelligent father, and parents who take a deal of trouble with this problem are very properly admired as models of fatherly and motherly virtue. Now, this is precisely what good prefects are doing all the time. Their work requires remarkable astuteness, exceptional ability, exquisite tact and infinite patience. Let no one be mistaken about the prefect. The assembly of gifts and talents and graces and heroisms necessary for a mere President or Governor or editor would by no means suffice to make a man a good prefect, and when he is found—and I have often found him—he ought to be acclaimed and cherished as the rarest and best of men.

At any rate, the remarkable qualities required to deal successfully with the infinite variety of a boy's troubles and a boy's foolishness are found in large measure in the usual prefect, and there is no power in money or any other emolument to repay the good prefect for the labor and solicitude and discomfort and worry connected with his work. Now I should like to ask the Catholic father to make a comparison between the secular school which omits altogether this precious paternal service and the Catholic school, where the failure of a boy either to make good or to be good is felt almost as poignantly as it would be by the boy's father at home, and where the inexhaustible treasures of loving solicitude and sympathetic watchfulness and counsel are poured over and about each by earnest religious men every hour of the day. And then I should like to ask that father whether he really believes the Catholic school is really appreciated as it ought to be. In the best Catholic schools observe the intellectual side of the work is done at least as well as in other institutions, and then this wonderful personal interest and helpfulness, which is beyond doubt the most precious thing in a boy's education is offered in addition. It can never be adequately repaid. Is it even reasonably appreciated?

There are two fairly good tests I think by which to judge of the situation. In the first place there are still too many Catholic boys attending non-Catholic colleges and universities. I leave out of account a considerable number who attend such schools because they cannot afford to go to Catholic schools, where there are no scholarships to be obtained, and who must usually attend school in large cities in which it is possible to earn one's way through college. I am considering only those who deliberately prefer to evade the very conditions which we look upon as the greatest advantage of the Catholic school, namely, the religious atmosphere and the paternal discipline. In this country the young man in most instances selects the school he will attend rather than the parents, and very rarely the young man is influenced more than the parents would be by considerations of comfort, liberty and opportunity for enjoyment. Both parents and sons are likely to have a fabulous notion of the superior merit of the teaching in other schools.

There is a widespread false notion

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